TC 1568

imagining 'east timor'

benedict anderson

Why has Indonesia's attempt to absorb East Timor failed? And how does one explain the very rapid development of Timorese nationalism since 1975? Benedict Anderson, author of *Imagined Communities*, argues that Indonesia cannot imagine the East Timorese as Indonesians. Their relations with them are those of colonizer and colonized, producing East Timorese nationalism as Dutch colonialism once produced Indonesian nationalism.

I WANT TO ASK TWO quite concrete questions which nevertheless involve a certain common theoretical problematic. The first question is: Why has Indonesia's attempt to absorb East Timor failed? Was the failure inevitable or did something happen between 1975 and 1990 which could have been avoided? What is the nature of the mistakes that were made, if there were indeed mistakes made? The second question is in some ways the reverse: How does one explain the very rapid spread and development of Timorese nationalism? For me this second question is very serious. My theoretical writings on nationalism have focused on the importance of the spread of print and its relationship to capitalism, yet in East Timor there has been very little capitalism, and illiteracy was widespread. Moreover, East Timor is ethnically very complicated,

Santa Cruz Cemetery, Dili, fifteen minutes before shooting began on 12 Novem

v do nations imagine themselves in the te twentieth century? What are the real ɔssibilities for nations growing in size?

with many different language groups. What was it then that made it possible to 'think East Timor'?

The first question came to me while I was in Portugal in May 1992. Among my Portuguese colleagues a discussion was going on about the memoir of General Costa Gomez. He was one of the key players in the Portuguese governments of 1974-76, at the time of the collapse of the Portugese empire, and one of those most responsible for decision making with regard to East Timor. In his memoir, he said that he and his friends thought East Timor would be like Goa — that it would be peacefully and easily absorbed into big Indonesia, just as little Goa was absorbed into big India. He argued that if only Jakarta hadn't been so brutal, if the Indonesian Army hadn't been so oppressive and exploitative, there would be no East Timor problem today. Hence, the tragedy of East Timor was neither his fault nor that of the Portuguese Government. East Timor could easily have been a happy, vibrant, participating part of Indonesia. Yet Costa Gomez's account in the end doesn't help us very much, since it does not explain the brutality and the exploitativeness of the Indonesian occupation.

Here we are faced with a question which relates not only to Indonesia, but engages the whole problematic of how nations imagine themselves in the late twentieth century and what the real possibilities are for nations growing in size rather than breaking up into smaller pieces. We have been seeing a lot of the latter in Eastern Europe and I suspect that more is going to occur in the future in other regions, in a kind of general scaling back of the national imagination — an inability to move towards inclusiveness and genuine incorporation. In the specific case of Indonesia, one needs to ask how the military leadership in Jakarta thinks about territory and peoples which they have determined to be 'Indonesian'. Clearly, the great difficulty has been to persuade themselves that the East Timorese 'really' are Indonesians. If they were, there would be only the simple task of scraping away a kind of superficial strangeness attributable to Portuguese colonization, revealing a 'natural Indonesianness' underneath.

Indonesian nationalism self-consciously sees itself as incorporating or covering many different ethnic-linguistic groups and many different religious cultures, precisely those agglomerated over centuries into the Netherlands East Indies. The commonality of 'Indonesia' is fundamentally one of historical experience and mythology. On the one hand, there is the conception of centuries of struggle against Dutch colonialism. On the other, there is the myth, powerful but also potentially divisive, of grand pre-colonial states, most notably that of Majapatit in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The Majapatit 'empire' has the advantage that its ill-defined extent can be read to include the whole of Timor, as well as regions today solidly part of Malaysia and Singapore. Yet it has the great disadvantage that it is closely identified with just one of Indonesia's ethnic groups, the Javanese. Hence state leaders have been very cautious about using it as a prime basis for the historical identity of modern Indonesia.

FOR JAKARTA, THEREFORE, the question is how to recompose the national people narrative so as to incorporate the East Timorese. It cannot be done in terms of resistance to Dutch imperialism. Nor can it be done in terms of the solid historical connections and contacts with the rest of the archipelago, for one of the peculiar characteristics of Portuguese colonialism was that it kept East Timor extremely isolated, except for links between Portugal, Macau, Mozambique, Angola and Goa. The obvious alternative to a historicized nationalism is of course, a biological-ethnic essentialism. In principle Jakarta could say: 'After all, we have the

1991. (Photo: Bob Muntz, Community Aid Abroad)

same physical features, our languages are connected, our original cultures were identical'. But this line of argument is tricky, for it leads to claims, unacceptable today, to the Philippines and Malaysia.

I think the result has been a deep inability to imagine East Timor as Indonesian. And if you can't imagine the East Timorese as really and truly 'brothers', what then? I was talking recently with a very intelligent East Timorese about his conversations with East Timorese students in Indonesian universities. There are at least a couple of thousand such students. Many of them drop out, partly as a result of language problems, but mainly because of what they experience as an intolerable social climate. He told me that what really enrages East Timorese students is that they are always being told how ungrateful they are. 'Look at all we have done for you! Where is your gratitude?' is what they hear day in day out from deans, professors, fellow students, and so forth. Is it likely that in the heyday of Indonesian nationalism people ran around the country telling fellow Indonesians whom they were enlisting to the nationalist cause that they should be 'grateful'. Even in the 1950s when Indonesia was shaken by many regionalist revolts, the accusation of ingratitude never emerged. The accusation then on all sides was typically that of 'betrayal' of a common historical project. By contrast, 'ingratitude' was a typical accusation by Dutch colonial officials against 'native' nationalism: 'Look at all we have done for you, down there, in terms of security, education, economic development, civilization'. The language is that of the superior and civilized towards the inferior and barbarous. It is not very far from racism, and reveals a profound incapacity to 'incorporate' the East Timorese, an unacknowledged feeling that they are really, basically, foreign.

One could argue this stance is evidenced by the extremist methods of rule that were used in East Timor after the invasion of 1975. The vast scale of the violence deployed, the use of aerial bombardments, the napalming of villages, the systematic herding of people into resettlement centres leading to the terrible starvation famines of 1977-80, have no real counterparts in Indonesian government policy towards, as it were, 'real Indonesians'. They seem more like policies for enemies than for national siblings. It is true that there was massive violence in the anti-Communist campaign of 1965-66. Yet the bulk of that violence was local in character, fuelled by the panic of millions of people about what was going to happen to themselves, their families, and so forth, 'if Communism prevailed'. It had its cold, planned elements certainly, but nothing comparable to the coldness and the plannedness of the ravaging of East Timor, which reminds me very much of the horrific depredation of Leopold's 'spectral agents' in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Conrad made the point that for these agents all civilized rules were abandoned in 'Africa'. There atrocities they would never get away with back home in Belgium were permissable.

It is true, of course, that East Timor posed very special problems for Jakarta. A substantial part of the population had long been Catholicized. Furthermore, because of Portugal's membership of NATO, the East Timorese resistance had better weapons and

military training, at the start, than any previous local opposition to Jakarta. It put up a very stiff fight, and many thousands of Indonesian troops were wounded or killed in the struggle, stimulating a strong battle-zone atmosphere in the territory. On the other hand, the war has gone on now for seventeen years — longer than any war Jakarta has conducted. This has meant that East Timor has been crucial in the careers of Indonesian military officers in a unique way. Most of the most successful and ambitious officers have fought in East Timor, and their promotions have depended in part on their success in conducting merciless repression and control.

The Indonesian Government has been unable to incorporate East Timor imaginatively, in the broader, popular sense. I have been very struck over the years by the extraordinary degree to which East Timor has been shut off, not merely from the outside world, but also from the rest of Indonesia. Until fairly recently, ordinary Indonesians could not go to this official part of their own country without special permission. Newspaper coverage of East Timor was exceptionally meagre, and even less truthful than the media coverage of other parts of Indonesia. It was thus possible for many Indonesians not to think about East Timor very much at all, let alone know about it. Hence it has never been successfully attached to popular nationalist feeling. This 'void' is very striking if you compare it to the troubled province of Irian, where Jakarta has for years been battling quasi-nationalist resistance. I now have staying with me the son of a friend of mine, a nineteen-year-old boy, who has just finished high school in West Java. He can barely recall the name of a single East Timorese, but he knows those of Irianese football players and journalists, and is a great fan of Ade, the popular transvestite Irianese TV comedian. Irian has an imaginative presence in Indonesia. No matter how badly treated Irianese may actually be in Irian itself, for Indonesians as a whole they are part of 'us'.

Did the Indonesian military leaders ever consider the possibility that they were playing, in reverse, the final trajectory of olonial relationship between themselves and the Dutch?

One last question to raise before turning to East Timorese nationalism itself again relates to the problem of imagination. Did the Indonesian military leaders ever consider the possibility that they were replaying, in reverse, the final trajectory of the colonial relationship between themselves and the Dutch? The Dutch have been in the archipelago since the start of the seventeenth century, but a recognizable nationalist movement did not appear until the very end of the nineteenth century or the beginning of the twentieth. Its rise was clearly tied to the decisions of the Dutch colonialists to start educating people, particularly in Dutch, to the spread of the modern mass media, to massive 'development' projects, and to the growth of a professionalized secret police and intelligence apparatus. For the first time, after 1900, natives were aware of themselves. People were targets of a systematic and centralized security apparatus. They were now conscious of being subjected to a single developmental project, and of having in common, in the minds of their rulers, their ineradicable 'nativeness'. They came to understand, through the Dutch language imposed on them in new schools, the very idea of colonialism as a system, and the modern means to emancipate themselves from it. Why did the Indonesian Government not see that Education-Repression-Development in East Timor followed exactly the logic of earlier Dutch policies, and that their failure was 'foretold' by Indonesia's own modern birth?

I NOW WANT TO TURN to the question of why East Timor has become so nationalist so quickly. The answers here are much less clear. Begin with the name itself: 'East Timor'. It is an expression which comes from the Mercatorian map, on which a pencilled administrative line divides Timor in half. How did this 'aerial' demarcation become so real a reality that it is possible for young people in Dili to think it is perfectly normal to call themselves 'East Timorese', as if these two words were one, no longer immediately pointing to 'West Timor'. In the video of the Dili massacre the kids' placards show slogans like 'Viva Timorleste' — all one word. The origins of this new consciousness certainly derive in part from a bureaucratic imagining which long pre-dates the invention of nationalism. It parallels the way in which (as I have argued in chapter nine of the new edition of my *Imagined Communities*) the Irianese were imagined or came into being, only perhaps in the last thirty years. Yet 'mapped imagination' is not a sufficient explanation.

What about social formation? If one looks at the situation up to 1974-75, one finds a typically Iberian colonial social order. Underneath the Portuguese ruling stratum were, by rank, wealthy, apolitical Chinese, the then niestizos of mixed African, Arab, Portuguese and local ancestries, and a plethora of 'native' ethnolinguist communities. One might expect to emerge from such a social order something like what one finds in the Philippines: leaders with an ambiguous political consciousness, very much aware of their mixed ancestries and external ties. Indeed, among the older East Timorese leaders of the 1970s one did find, quite often, a kind of unsureness of identity, and a resentful attachment to things Portuguese. East Timor was as real a place, but was there then a real 'East Timorese' community for which they were the natural leaders? My sense is that in 1974-75 true East Timor nationalism was still quite thin on the ground; perhaps only a small percentage of the population could then really imagine the future nation-state of East Timor.

Since 1975 this situation has changed dramatically. The question is why, given the virtual absence of print-capitalism, and the still substantial illiteracy? In a recent interview with *Editor*, a major Jakarta magazine, General Sjafei, the East Timor military commander, said something very revealing. Describing the intensive measures that were taken to head off the *Dusitania*, the ship that tried to go to Dili from Darwin with a group of students and reporters aboard, he noted that the ship itself was not dangerous, but said that if it managed to anchor in Dili harbour, 'it could be that I would be facing 120,000 inhabitants of the city of Dili', and 'under the circumstances I could not guarantee that there would not be an explosion of the masses'. This language is completely new. Never before has the Army talked about 'explosions of the masses' in East Timor or that it faced '120,000 people in Dili'. For years it has claimed that only a few dozen diehard opponents existed deep in the mountainous interior. Sjafei's statement is precisely that of a colonial power suddenly aware of its impending demise. It is just like the Dutch recognition in 1946 that Indonesia had changed completely since 1940 when their power had seemed impregnable.

We here return to the ironical logic of colonialism. If you look at the official speeches about East Timor, you will never find Suharto or the generals talking about its people as anything but 'East Timorese', even though there are at least thirty ethnic or tribal groups in the region. In the same way, the Jakarta regime never talks about Asmat or Dhani, but always about Irianese. This exactly parallels the late colonial Netherlands East Indies, where the colonized knew they were all 'natives' together in their rulers' eyes, no matter what island, ethnicity or religion they belonged to. A profound sense of commonality emerged from the gaze of the colonial state. Indonesian power is infinitely more penetrating, infinitely more widespread, than Portuguese colonial power ever was. It is there in the smallest villages, and is represented by hundreds of military posts and a huge intelligence apparatus. Thus the consciousness of being East Timorese has spread rapidly since 1975 precisely because of the state's expansion, new schools and development projects also being part of this.

One of the main projects of the Suharto state has been to 'develop' Indonesia. This necessarily involves a certain kind of definition of what it means to be a real Indonesian. Part of this definition has emerged from the anti-Communist massacres of 1965-66, which were understood in part as a fight against atheism. Hence today every Indonesian has to have a proper book-religion. Here the Indonesian state finds itself caught in a strange bind. In 1975, a majority of East Timorese were still animists. Making them 'Indonesian' meant 'raising' them from animism to having a proper religion, which given existing realities meant Catholicism. At the same time the state was perfectly aware of the dangers of the spread of Catholicism, particularly since Rome insisted on dealing directly with East Timor, bypassing the conformist Indonesian Catholic hierarchy. So the Indonesian regime found itself both wanting and distrusting Catholicism's spread. In the last seventeen years, the Catholic population of the territory has more than doubled in size. In East Timor, everyone is aware that if you are a member of the Catholic Church, you enjoy protection according to the state's own logic; at the same time a popular Catholicism has emerged as an expression of a common suffering, just as it did in nineteenth-century Ireland. This Catholic commonality in some sense substitutes for the kind of nationalism I have talked about elsewhere, which comes from print-capitalism. Moreover, the decision of the Catholic hierarchy in East Timor to use Tetun, not Indonesian, as the language of the Church, has had profoundly nationalizing effects. It has raised Tetun from being a local language or lingua franca in parts of East Timor to becoming, for the first time, the language of 'East Timorese' religion and identity.

But there is a further colonial irony at work. For young Indonesian intellectuals at the turn of the century, the language of the colonizer, Dutch, was the language through which it became possible to communicate across the colony, and to understand the real condition of the country. It was also the language of access to modernity and the world beyond the colony. For one generation at least, Dutch performed the absolutely essential function of getting natives out of the prisons of local ethnic languages. In the same way, the spread of Indonesian in the Jakarta-sponsored school system has created a new generation of young Timorese who are quite fluent in Indonesian, and who, through Indonesian, have found access to the world beyond Indonesia. Indonesian is not the language of internal solidarity among the East Timorese young but it is one of the important languages of access to modern life. Indonesian/Tetun corresponds in 1990 to Dutch/Indonesian in 1920.

Thinking about nationalism at the end of this century, we may have to think more about situations like East Timor, where nationalist projects can turn into 'colonial' projects, thereby contributing to the fragmentation of the post Second World War new states that were inherited from European dominion in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Benedict Anderson *teaches Indonesian politics at Cornell University. He is author of* Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins of Nationalism. *This article is based on a lecture at Monash University in 1992.*

THE PATH TO
HAPPINESS

Many Australians share the same view as Buddhists that belief in a living creator is illogical and an insult to people's intelligence in this modern scientific age.

Buddhist philosophy is scientific, in that you are exhorted to test each proposition before accepting it. Blind faith has no place in Buddhism. If you would like to learn more of this teaching which is relevant to day-to-day life in today's world, send a few stamps to cover postage to.

Buddhist Education Centre
1/20 Victoria Street, Lewisham, NSW 2049

and we will send you information on the Buddhist attitude to life, love, compassion, sex and death.

HOW TO LIVE WITHOUT
FEAR AND WORRY

This outstanding book, now in its seventh printing, shows how you can understand and overcome worry at its source. Send $10 to cover cost and postage.

THE TIBETAN BOOK OF
LIVING AND DYING

This much sought after book by Sogyal Rinpoche is now available for $34 including cost and postage.